

## *Response to Hakirah Readers*

By: DAVID P. GOLDMAN

My essay on Rav Soloveitchik's understanding of antinomies in Judaism cited the bitter divisions over Israel's judicial reform as an instantiation of the Rav's presentation of irreconcilable antinomies in Jewish life. It was not my intention to wade deep into the weeds of Israeli politics, but to illustrate a more fundamental issue. Is scientific discovery in the cause of the dignity of humankind a religious obligation? And does investigation of the mind of the Creator in nature have merit comparable to Torah scholarship? These are the existential questions. I would prefer to focus on them, but *Hakirah* readers seem more concerned with the particularities of Israeli politics. Respondents have raised reasonable objections which deserve answers.

David Gillis observes that many religious Israelis joined the demonstrations against judicial reform, contending that I distorted the national divide over the reform by presenting it as a secular-religious divide. I am not Israeli, and I acknowledge Mr. Gillis' claim that my presentation oversimplifies the issue. Nonetheless, the available polling data show clearly that support for the judicial reforms broadly coincides with the secular-religious divide. Zvika Klein reported in the *Jerusalem Post* on June 12, 2023:

To gain insight into public opinion on the reform, the Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the IDI conducted a series of surveys from January to April 2023. These surveys analyzed support for the reform among different groups based on their level of religiosity. The findings indicated a strong correlation between religious affiliation and attitudes towards the reform.

In January 2023, respondents were asked about their opinion on the suggested judicial reform. The survey revealed a significant influence of religiosity on support for the reform. Secular Jews displayed the least support, with only 16% considering the reform as "very good" or "pretty good." In comparison, 22% of the traditional non-

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religious, 48% of the traditional-religious and 66% of the orthodox and ultra-orthodox viewed the reform favorably.

According to the study, as time passed, the religious divide regarding the reform widened further. By April, the percentage of secular and traditional non-religious Jews with negative views of the reform increased, while all other groups saw a rise in those regarding the reform as positive.

The fact that a majority of religious Israelis support the reform and a majority of secular Israelis oppose it does not entirely answer Mr. Gillis' objection. Nonetheless, the *mabloket* over judicial reform reflects a deep rift within Am Yisrael. The task before us is to heal it. Mr. Hoffman writes:

The conflict is not primarily ideological but sociological. And it is mainly fueled not by high-flown ideas about ethics in the public sphere or deep concerns about the sort of country one's children will inherit—though these are certainly important—but rather by more elemental, primal feelings: contempt and anger. Contempt that is expressed not just in words but also in actions that reflect a thoughtless, dismissive, complete failure of empathy. And anger, sometimes rising to fury, at being treated in this way and with this attitude.

Elitist cronyism, prejudice against Sepharadim, and the incestuous self-selection of the elite prompt resentment among the Israeli “deplorable,” as he quotes Hillary Clinton.

The sociological divide is daunting indeed: “In 2017, the average wage of second-generation Ashkenazi (Eastern European) immigrant men stood at NIS 16,961, 36% higher than the average wage of second-generation Sephardi men, which stood at NIS 13,291,” reported the *Jerusalem Post* on April 1, 2019. Israel's venture capital industry is dominated by Ashkenazim, who comprise 78% of Israel's serial entrepreneurs, according to a Technion study. One can deplore the failure of Israeli society to close this gap three generations after the founding of the State, and still acknowledge that Israel's economy and security depend on its technologists. Israel ranks first in the world in R&D as a percent of Gross Domestic Product (5.6% vs. 3.5% for the United States) and first in the contribution of high-tech industry to growth. It may be regrettable that so few Sephardim are prominent in Israel's high-tech industry, and that Sephardic workers have lagged behind their Ashkenazic cousins in earnings, but Israel's high-tech sector has existential importance for the survival of the state. If I focus on the high-tech elite of North Tel Aviv, it is because this elite has transformed Israel's economy and military and is indispensable for the survival of the state. The Ashkenazic elite sets the pace in media

and academia as well as business; the broader problem of opportunity for Sephardim and other groups in Israeli society is an important but entirely separate question.

There are a host of contingent factors bearing on the divisions in Israeli society, many of them well presented by Gillis and Hoffman. But even if King Solomon applied his wisdom and resolved these particular problems, we would find others to fight about—until we learn, that is, to live with the Majestic and Covenantal imperatives set before the Jewish people. 